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Bill on autonomy empowers IIMs

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The Indian Institute of Management Bill, 2017, which was introduced in the Lok Sabha recently, meets the longstanding demand for greater autonomy for India's premier management institutions. The bill is a redrafted version of an earlier bill which had attracted much criticism for its provisions that sought to extend and perpetuate government control over them. According to the original bill, all major decisions could be taken by the IIM management only with prior government approval. The fee structure, too, had to be approved by the government. The new bill is much more acceptable, and marks a welcome change from the record of governments in the past. In 2003, the then HRD minister Murli Manohar Joshi had tried to bring the IIMs under strong government control. The UPA government had also pursued the same course. The original bill was drafted when Smriti Irani was the HRD minister. Better sense seems to have prevailed since and the government has done well to respond positively to the comments and suggestions made in the public realm.

The bill seeks to ensure freedom for the IIMs in terms of administration, recruitment and daily functioning. They will be run by their respective boards, and will be "board-driven, with the chairperson and director selected by the board" and will not be controlled by the government. At present, the boards make their recommendations and the government accepts or rejects them. The composition of the boards, the selection of chairmen and the fee structure will now be decided by the IIMs. The boards will also be socially inclusive. Autonomy should mean freedom to select faculty and devise curriculum. The bill envisages the best and global standards to be pursued in the curriculum and pedagogy with the involvement of experts from all fields. The proposal in the original bill to set up a coordination forum with the HRD minister as its conveyor had invited much opposition. The forum will now have only limited powers and the minister will not be its conveyor. It will only be an advisory body. The IIMs will also have the power to award degrees, instead of diplomas.

The IIMs are among India's best institutions of specialised higher education. The oldest among them are highly regarded. But none of them figures among the topmost institutions in the world. The first requirement for them when they aspire for excellence at the international level is freedom from political and official interference. The Cabinet has said that they will have complete autonomy, combined with accountability. The prime minister has said that the aim of the bill is to further excellence. No controversial provision should be added to it now.